

Book Introductions: New Testament

Matthew is a gospel that seems to have been written for Jewish Christians. It incorporates much of Mark's material, but builds the story around five major sections of Jesus' teaching (most famously his Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7). Jesus is seen to be the Messiah who fulfills the Old Testament Scriptures. So now the prophesied King has come, but where is His kingdom? Matthew explains how Jesus is rejected by the leaders of Israel and introduces a new phase in God's plan – this thing called the "Church."

Mark was probably the first gospel to be written. Mark spent time with both Paul and Peter, and their influence shows up in his gospel (some even refer to it as Peter's gospel written by Mark!) It moves along at a fast pace, racing from event to event in Christ's ministry. Although shorter than the other gospels, don't dismiss Mark's writing ability! The reader is told clearly in the first verse who Jesus is, but the people in the book struggle to understand who He is. Once the disciples start to get it, then Jesus makes it clear that you can't have a Messiah who just does miracles, you also have to grasp that the Messiah has come to suffer and die – the suffering servant of the Lord. Faith in Christ without the cross is incomplete. They struggle to understand the reality of who Jesus is, or what it means to follow Him: not a glorious life, but following in His footsteps. Throughout the gospel Jesus' disciples are being taught by Him, not just through words, but then also through practical experience. The book moves quickly and ends abruptly (which later writers tried to remedy by offering their own endings).

Luke, the physician and companion of Paul, set out to carefully and accurately present Christ and the gospel of salvation for all mankind. Throughout both books of Luke, there is a strong emphasis on the plan of God. Jesus "had to" do what he did, he "had to" suffer, etc. Jesus is clearly portrayed as the divinely appointed figure who was to fulfill the plan of God. Luke, perhaps because of his profession, takes care to present the compassion of Jesus for all kinds of people, including the poor, women, children and social outcasts. Luke also emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit throughout both Luke and Acts. Although Luke uses Mark, and perhaps Matthew too, his diligent research also leads to the inclusion of various other events that enrich his gospel (eg. Simeon and Anna, the road to Emmaus, the ascension, the story of Zaccheus and many parables of Jesus).

John was the last gospel to be written and has a very different feel than the three "synoptic gospels" ("one-view"). His goal is clearly stated in 20:31 – John was written so that the reader will believe that Jesus is the divine Messiah and thereby have everlasting life. The first half of the book is built around a series of seven "signs." These begin with turning water into wine, and conclude with the compelling miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. Throughout the book Jesus' claim to be God is found in his "I am" statements. There is repeated emphasis on faith and its counterpart – unbelief. The crowds want Him to be their king, but the leaders definitely do not "believe" in Him. Those who will believe in Him receive eternal life, life to the full! So the story moves toward Calvary, Jesus heading to his death with the calm dignity of a King in control of his circumstances. In the suffering and death of Jesus, we actually see His glory revealed! John gives us great insight into the final week before Calvary. More than that, Jesus' prayer in chapter 17 actually gives us great insight into the Trinity itself! Is it possible to know God, to have sins forgiven, to become part of God's family? John's answer is a resounding yes!

Acts is really Luke part 2! Luke's gospel is what Jesus began to do and teach, and Acts continues the story of Christ's influence following His return to heaven. Acts is the story of Christ building His church, as the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection prayerfully preach on through persecution! The story moves from the birth of the church at Pentecost to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome. In these three decades, the young church grew from a group of hesitant disciples to a major spiritual force. The reason for the transformation is the work of the Spirit in and through these young believers. Initially the ministry of the young church is very Jewish focused and Jerusalem centered. Midway through the book Paul is converted and called to his mission among the Gentiles. Paul's three journeys, imprisonment, three trials and a trip to Rome, are the skeleton of the story. The flesh on that skeleton is the story of God working out His purposes as the risen Christ is proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles right the way to Rome. The book ends with the story incomplete: What happened to Paul in Rome? Was he freed to travel more? What happened to the church? Acts is a lively story of Christian expansion, a story that began in Acts and continues to this day.

Romans is a real heavyweight among the epistles. Paul had never been to Rome, but he wrote this letter from Corinth during his third missionary journey (AD57) partly to address issues of division between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome. Paul begins with a bang and then keeps up his intensity for the whole letter. He is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for everyone who believes, first the Jew, then the Gentile. In the gospel we find the righteousness of God revealed. In the first three chapters he underlines humanity's problem – we all lack God's righteousness. From the end of chapter 3 through to the end of chapter 8 we see God's provision – He gives us His righteousness. The question that naturally arises after the climax of chapter 8 is what about Israel? Are we really secure if Israel has been "separated from the love of God?" So in chapters 9 to 11 Paul focuses on God's promise – He has not broken His promises to Israel, so we can trust His promise of righteousness to us. Then from chapter 12 onwards it is time for more specific application – we are to lovingly live out God's righteousness. Yet righteousness is not the only big theme in Romans. Also we see the pairing of sin and grace, with God's grace always greater than our sin. We see the depth of the sin problem in the hearts of humanity, and the profound provision of God's loving work through Christ and the Holy Spirit. We see the gospel transforming believers from the inside out, as well as the ongoing struggle for believers still awaiting their resurrected bodies. We see the emphasis on unity among God's people – all are equally lost, all are saved by grace through faith, all should lovingly accept one another. Romans is a glorious example of the rich theology of the gospel relevantly applied to real life!

1st Corinthians is the first of two letters from Paul to the church in Corinth. He'd founded the church during his 18 months there on his second missionary journey. Now almost five years later he hears disturbing things about the Corinthian church. In chapters 1-6 Paul responds to reports he's heard about problems in Corinth, then in the rest of the letter he responds to questions they had asked him. The problems he addresses include divisions in the church, disorder in the church (incest, legal disputes, immorality), confusion over marriage, food offered to idols, public worship (unloving behavior at "love feasts," unloving use of spiritual gifts), and the nature of resurrection. All these problems stemmed from their prideful sense of having arrived spiritually and their lack of love for each other.

2nd Corinthians is another letter from Paul to the Christians in Corinth. This letter begins with a positive set of personal reassurances and encouragements. In chapters 3-5, for instance, he offers a dramatic comparison of the superiority of the new era of the Spirit which magnifies Christ, over the law-centered era of Moses. The old covenant had a fading glory; the new covenant has an increasing and intrinsic glory being displayed in transformed believers. Paul's life, even in the midst of persecutions, models the power of God at work in a life. In this life we are motivated by Christ's love and prepared for the eternal glory to come. The tone of the letter shifts after this, becoming very stern at points. A major concern for Paul is that the church be prepared to help in the financial gift being collected for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is also aware that some in Corinth have questioned his authority, a matter he addresses forcefully near the end of the letter.

Galatians was probably Paul's first letter. Written to churches in modern day Turkey, Paul was deeply angered by developments in the churches there. Paul contrasts looking to the law for salvation and spiritual growth with a life focused on Christ and lived by faith. First he has to defend his authority, and that of his message against those who insisted on a law-centered spirituality. To turn back to the Old Testament law is like Abraham's attempt to help God out by turning to Hagar, his wife's maid. The result was a slave rather than a true son. In the same way, trying to live under the law is turning to fruitless enslavement. But Christ set us free to be free, to live by faith not works, to walk in step with the Spirit, not to be bound by the fruit of the flesh.

Ephesians was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. It was written to the young church of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day western Turkey), where Paul had earlier had a significant ministry (see Acts 18-20). Ephesians is about the church of Jesus Christ. The church is a body united in Christ – because now there is no longer division between Jew and Gentile, both are one. The first three chapters describe the calling of the church – our amazing spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, our salvation, our unity, our identity. The last three chapters spell out the implications of that calling – the conduct of the church. Christians are to walk in a manner worthy of their calling. Practical issues such as church unity, personal purity, marriage relationship, family life and spiritual warfare are all addressed in this powerful letter.

Philippians is a thank you letter sent by prisoner Paul to the church at Philippi who had sent help to him upon hearing of his difficult situation. It is also a commendation of Timothy and Epaphroditus (being sent to help address some internal squabbles in the church). While the letter is very positive, Paul does know of tensions in the church, including those between Euodia and Syntyche. So Paul calls for some attitudes to change. Selfishness and grumbling are not appropriate. Instead Christ is lifted up as the supreme example of selflessness. At the same time, Paul's personal circumstances are very difficult, making his joyful faith all the more inspiring. Paul's personal expressions of devotion to Christ make this one of the most warm-hearted, encouraging and joyful books of the Bible.

Colossians is like the sister letter to Ephesians. Both were written by Paul at about the same time, they contain some similar thoughts and both build up the believers' understanding of their position in Christ. If Ephesians is about the church of Christ, then Colossians is about the Christ of the church! In Colossae there were false teachers that were undermining the Christians' view of Jesus. They were teaching the believers to focus on angels and extra rules, but Paul reminded them that Jesus created and sustains everything. Jesus is the only one worthy of worship. Jesus conquered all other spiritual forces. The believers were to look to Jesus, to set their hearts on things above and to live out their devotion to Christ in loving harmony with one another. Paul's letter is one of the greatest descriptions of Christ anywhere in the Bible!

1st Thessalonians is Paul's response to Timothy's report about the young church in Thessalonica. It was facing persecution, but it was growing. Paul had been forced to leave the city soon after arriving because of hostility (see Acts 17). Now he was concerned for their well-being. All seemed to be going well, although there was some anxiety about the status of Christians who had died before Christ's return. Paul reassures the remaining believers that those who have died have not missed out on anything, for they will rise first at the rapture, but those who remain alive should live pure lives in anticipation of Christ's return.

2nd Thessalonians was written just a few months after the first letter – same church, similar issues. Someone had distorted Paul's teaching, claiming that the day of the Lord had come already. Paul writes to reassure them that certain things must precede Christ's return. In the meantime, the Thessalonian believers are called to stand firm in Christ's love. However, looking forward to Christ's immanent return should not lead to giving up work and being idle. Those who were choosing this lifestyle were rebuked by Paul and urged to return to responsible employment.

1st Timothy is a letter from Paul to his younger colleague. Paul had left Timothy in Ephesus and so wrote this letter to encourage him in his leadership within the church. Actually, the letter not only encouraged Timothy, but also served to reinforce his authority as a representative of the apostle. How should the local church function? How should men and women behave in light of the amazing mercy of the gospel? What are the qualifications for elders and deacons? How should the church care for the vulnerable? This letter is brimming with relevant material for the church in every generation, including ours.

2nd Timothy is Paul's final letter – a very personal and touching letter to the younger man he has mentored over many years. Paul is imprisoned again and is aware that his time is running out. He is passionately concerned that the baton of the gospel be effectively passed to the next generation of leadership. Paul is deeply concerned about the challenges facing the church from without and from within. He urges Timothy to moral and spiritual purity. He urges Timothy to remember what he's learned from Paul in their ministry together. He urges Timothy to hold fast to the Scripture – God's provision for maintaining the health of the Church.

Titus is similar to 1st Timothy – a letter written to a representative left behind as Paul pressed on during his final days of freedom. This time it was Titus, left on Crete to establish the spiritual leadership of the local church there. For the church to survive and thrive in a difficult culture, it needed spiritually qualified men to lead and protect it. Paul also urges Titus to involve all the believers in the ministry of the church, so that their good doctrine would be dressed up in the good deeds of Christian ministry.

Philemon lived in Colossae and was a believer in the church there. One of his slaves, Onesimus, had robbed his master and escaped, traveling to Rome. Somehow he came into contact with Paul and became a believer in Christ! Onesimus had become useful to Paul, but they knew he had to return to his master Philemon. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon along with this tactful and affectionate letter. Roman law stated that a runaway slave could be punished or killed very violently – only the power of the Gospel transformed this situation so that Onesimus could return to His master as a useful brother in Christ!

Hebrews - nobody is certain who wrote it, but all are certain this is a rich book! In fact, Hebrews reads more like a sermon than an epistle. The recipients are facing some struggles in their Christian experience. They are tempted to fall away from Jesus and return to the "safety" of synagogue Judaism. The writer, or preacher, points them to Jesus who has also suffered, but is now glorified and exalted. He is the example that is to motivate them as they struggle. He is the final revelation of God, greater than angels, greater than Moses, a superior priest, inaugurating a superior covenant, with a superior offering in a superior sanctuary! The hearers of Hebrews were urged to not shrink back, but to press on in faith. They were to press on to the fullness of the rest of faith in Jesus' work. They were to press on into the holy of holies to boldly approach God's throne and worship Him. They were to press on toward the city God is building for them. Hebrews tells us how Jesus is greater than everything else. It urges us to press on in faith!

James was the half-brother of Jesus, but look at how he begins his letter – "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." James was a skeptic who was converted after his half-brother's resurrection. He became concerned with how faith is lived out, not only in his own life, but also in the community of God's people. He was one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem, a leader with a concern for "true religion." Devotion to God should be expressed in a genuine devotion to others. True faith shows in both personal purity and concern for others (see James 1:27). James reflects a lot of the Sermon on the Mount, and his idea of what Christian faith should look like is remarkably similar to Jesus' teaching – James is the gospels in epistle form!

1st Peter – Peter wrote this letter to Christians that had been dispersed into foreign territory in ancient Turkey. The letter was an encouragement to stand firm in the grace of God. The reality of their salvation meant that their lives were different than those around, which led to suspicion, mistrust and disapproval. How should they respond in the face of hostility? Not with shame or doubt. But rather with commitment to personal holiness, love for each other, and trust in the work of God in their lives. Peter felt it was important to encourage them in their struggles, but also instruct them in the challenging areas of submission to unjust authorities and of suffering for the right reasons. The letter begins by describing our great salvation, then addresses the issue of submission as a foundation for the instruction regarding suffering. Peter wants them to live in such a way that they don't create unnecessary tension and hostility, but with hope for when the going genuinely does get tough. Finally it ends with comments on service as a believer. Christ is an example to the believer who suffers, but also His resurrection is a source of great hope, and His care is a great source of encouragement to stand firm in the grace of God. 1st Peter is a clarion call to live our lives in light of eternity to come!

2nd Peter – How should Christians live in light of the certainty of Christ's second coming? Specifically, how should Christians respond when there are false teachers around who deny His coming, including the judgment to come, and thus live like pagans among the believers? True Christians should grow in godliness and love, underlining their election and calling. They should trust in the certainty of Christ's coming. They should also be clear that false teachers who deny His coming are certain to face judgment for their rejection of holy living. There is a difference between genuine freedom in Christ and the immoral freedoms of license. In the last chapter Peter clarifies the error of the false teachers – their cynical indifference to prophetic warnings. Since the Day of the Lord is coming, readiness is urged, not recklessness.

1st John is one of the last books in the New Testament, written by the last remaining apostle. It was written to an unnamed church struggling with a split. Some of the church members had left the main group and were trying to recruit others. Behind all this were leaders who claimed to have a special knowledge of God's will. John confronts the claims of the false teachers and reassures the faithful members in the church of the certainty of their standing with God. Their faith was genuine. They did have fellowship with God. This was clear from their love for God and each other. It showed in their resistance of the false teaching and the improper conduct that went with it. It was evident in their personal experience of the Spirit within them, affirming their love and commitment to the truth. At the root of John's response to the false teaching stood the history of Christ's incarnation – since Jesus truly did become flesh, true human fellowship with God is truly possible!

2nd & 3rd John are a pair of brief letters sent to leading members of small churches. They deal with questions about itinerant teachers, which were a big feature of early church life. 2nd John confronts the inappropriate hospitality offered to teachers with flawed views of Christ – love needs truth. 3rd John confronts an inappropriate lack of hospitality because of the influence of self-centred Diotrephes – truth needs love. Diotrephes was wrong in motive and action, and caused great problems in the church. In contrast Gaius was doing well as a leader in a difficult context, and John urged him to offer an appropriate welcome to Demetrius. This pair of letters show how love must be guided by proper values and sound doctrine.

Jude, along with James, is traditionally identified as a half-brother of Jesus. He wrote this letter to help a church deal with false members. These pseudo-spiritualists were dismissing the true message of God's grace in Christ, instead offering a faith that embraced immoral sensuality. This group was led by strong characters who spoke with authority. Jude points to Old Testament examples of similar errors. The church, instead, should be devoted to the content and conduct they had received through Christ by the Spirit. The letter ends with a well-known and beautiful statement of praise.

Revelation is the final book in the Bible and it tells the end of the story. After sixty years of serving Jesus, elderly John is imprisoned on the island of Patmos when he gets to see his beloved Jesus again. This book is the revelation of Jesus Christ! The book identifies itself as a prophecy. It begins with a glorious and overwhelming presentation of Jesus, the beginning and the end, the One whose resurrection transforms everything. This Jesus gives letters to seven local churches to urge them to live out their present calling in light of their eternal future. By the end of the book John is allowed to see the end of the story – the glorious return of Christ, His reign and the New Jerusalem descending to the New Earth. With sinners fully and finally judged, and the sin problem completely answered, redeemed humanity has a glorious future dwelling in the presence of God! Yet Revelation is often neglected, perhaps because of the debates swirling around the meaning of the evocative imagery used. The bulk of the book consists of series of judgments pouring out on the earth from heaven in anticipation of Christ's return to the earth. Revelation may spark debate as to its meaning, but it promises blessing to the one who reads it. Read it, be blessed, find hope in the midst of a hopeless world, and allow your eyes to be lifted from today to the future, to the day when we will be with Jesus! Maranatha, even so, come quickly Lord!

*Cor Deo is a ministry committed to multiplying ministry that shares God's heart.
In every Cor Deo training programme we seek to share a passion for the reading of the Bible.
It is our hope that these book introductions may nudge a few people into the Bible,
the revelation of the heart of God and the source of spiritual transformation.*

Ron Frost & Peter Mead